

keeping on by TolkienGirl

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Summary:

Steve drives Dustin home from the dance.

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The air is frosty. Goddamn, he has to get this heater fixed. Steve pulls the ends of his sleeves over his hands and drums on the steering wheel.

They all come out in a tight little knot—Mike-Eleven-Lucas-Max-Will-Dustin—but in a second the knot fans out, fracturing. Steve thinks he can see the fault lines. Mike and Eleven, holding hands. Lucas and Max, shoulder to shoulder. Will hanging back, waiting for Jonathan, probably.

Steve doesn't want to think about who Jonathan's probably waiting for.

Dustin looks kind of lost for a second. He's shifting from one foot to another. His hair is sort of a halo, now, and Steve thinks it probably suits him better.

Then Dustin sees Steve's car, and grins that little kid grin.

"Hey, bud," Steve says. "Good time?"

Nancy comes outside with Jonathan. Steve drives away without looking back.

"It was pretty great," Dustin says. "The punch was *awesome*. It had pineapple juice in it. And they played some good stuff."

Steve elbows him and winks demonstratively. "And the *ladies*?"

Dustin goes a little dreamy-eyed, and looks like he's about to say something, and then he doesn't. He chews his lower lip for a second. Then he says, "I think my game still needs a little work."

"Still farther along than I was, at your age."

"Really?" Dustin looks hopeful.

"Nah. But you're getting there." Being Steve Freaking Harrington isn't always a walk in the park, either, but Steve thinks Dustin probably

needs the illusion.

“I got to dance with one girl though.” Still that careful tone, which Steve can’t quite suss out, but at least the kid looks happy.

“What I tell you, man? What’d I tell you? You were great.”

Dustin leans back against the seat. His dimples are showing. Steve remembers that feeling, being on top of the world. Problem is, it almost always involved Nancy. He shakes away the memory. God, he’s not fit for much, is he? Fussing over eighth-graders and pining over someone who crushed his heart in her tight little fist.

Well, the first part isn’t that bad.

“Thanks again,” Dustin says, as he hops out. Kid is really going to need to do something different with his hair someday, but that can wait. “It was awesome, Steve. You’re awesome.”

“I manage,” Steve says, with his best cool-cat nonchalance. Then again, pretty much everything he does impresses Dustin for some reason, so he’s not exactly sure why he puts in the effort. Maybe because it’s way more hopeful than it should be, getting these little squirts to tell him he’s still a hero.

Maybe.

“My mom wants you to come to dinner,” Dustin announces next, in one breath. “If—if you want. To thank you for all your help. In the past month and stuff.”

“What does she think I did?”

“Fought off some bullies.”

Bullies, demadogs. Sure. “Same difference,” Steve says. It’s easy to actually grin, when it’s Dustin. That kid is just plain sunshiney, even when he’s down.

“So you’ll come?”

Steve pretends to think on it for a moment, so that Dustin looks ready

to burst a blood vessel or something.

“Long as you don’t have any more monsters in your basement,” he agrees at last. Then he shifts his car into gear and blasts off.